

## 003 - Darkrooms by nervousalligator

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## 003 - Darkrooms

Jonathan can't sleep. At all.

Thoughts are rushing through his mind as he lies in bed that night - the spot he's decided to stare at on the ceiling seems to be the only point of stability right now. What had happened? And how? He thinks about the darkness enveloping him and the bizarre, floaty feeling of being in that place. The frightening pull tearing at his mind when he had fallen out of it...wait. What if it happened in *here*? No. No, you had to focus for that to happen according to El. But how had he managed that focus if he didn't even know he was doing it?

Was this something that just happened to people? Had a part of El somehow leaked onto him? Could things like that transfer? El had undergone experiments under the careful watch of the people in that lab for years... He didn't grow up in a lab. He'd just been a fairly ordinary guy that nothing extraordinary really happened to. Well, until that week in '83 of course. And the year after that. And now... Ok, maybe some extraordinary things. Alternate dimensions existed, monsters were real, the government was - as anyone would've guessed - corrupt, a little girl could flip vans with her mind and now apparently he could talk to people without being in the same room as them.

Maybe some people could pick up on it? He had never been particularly spiritual, his mom was more like that if anything, but considering all of the weird stuff he'd learned about in the last couple of years, maybe spirituality wasn't *that* farfetched? Maybe all it was was some strange state of mind that everybody could dip into and El with her experience had just taught him to do that? But why didn't Will pick up on it, then? And what was that about Mike "not answering"?

He turns over on his side with a frustrated, sleepless sigh, laying one of his hands on the empty pillow beside him, wishing that Nancy was there. She always knew how to make him feel less lost and alone. Always listened even if he wasn't always that good at talking. But maybe it was stupid to bring this up.

*Don't stir shit up again, he tells himself. Don't bring all of this up again. They've had enough.*

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In the following week Will and El convince Jonathan to do the blindfolded sessions again to try and dip into whatever had happened that Friday afternoon. Jonathan even goes into his own room with El's guidance to try and tap into Will in theirs and vice versa, but nothing comes of it. Will can't seem to understand either El or Jonathan's explanations on how he needs to feel to go there and honestly Jonathan has no idea how to describe it anyway. They all conclude that blindfolds aren't going to cut it for either of them right now.

Maybe it was a fluke. Just a lapse or gap, like when the stylus jumps on his record player sometimes.

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"How's El doing?" Nancy asks him as they gaze at the stars twinkling in the clear midnight sky, huddled up on the hood of his car.

"She's good," he answers with a nod and then chuckles lightly. "She did pretty well on her English test today apparently." He catches her eyes, a smile playing on his lips. She smiles back.

"It was her mostly, I just gave her the push."

"A pretty important push, though." Jonathan's brow creases with a hint of concern. "She's very happy to have you, you know. I mean...we are."

Nancy's smile widens as she hums in response and settles against his chest. "It's the least I can do. She's a smart kid."

Jonathan squeezes her shoulder gently and peers out into the black expanse once again. "Yeah. She is."

They sit in silence for a moment and soon enough his thoughts start running and mixing up. He feels like the towering darkness might threaten to swallow them whole, that feeling of being completely lost in endless blackness rushes back to the front of his mind. Nancy must've noticed his heart racing because she sits up.

"I wonder how she does it," he mumbles.

Nancy tilts her head at him. "What?" she quips. "Study?"

"No," he grins. "I mean the things she does. You know... Closing gates. Opening jars of peanut butter." His eyes escape to the sky again, distant. "Talking..."

"Talking?"

"Yeah. Like she did with Will...and-"

"Mind reading?"

Jonathan catches a rebuttal in his throat and swallows it. "Uh, yeah. Sure."

Nancy sighs. "I don't know." He feels her eyes search for his and he comes back down to meet them. She looks worried. "Why? Did something happen? To her?"

Her big, blue eyes are piercing him. Something tightens in his chest as it plans an escape, but he just shakes his head. "Oh. No, it's fine. I just..." He attempts a smile. "I get curious sometimes, I guess. Like how she feels about it. Trying to have a normal life when you can do those kind of...things."

"Yeah. I can't even imagine. I don't think anyone can, really."

He looks down at his hands while she continues.

"But she's doing so good. I just hope she knows that there's people here that love her, that don't want to use her because of that. That

there's nothing wrong with her."

He smiles again, and this time it feels genuine.

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One morning Jonathan is making breakfast as usual, thinking about the recent events. He looks down into the frying pan at the eggs simmering there and his mind starts to wander, his brother's words from that day echoing in his head.

*What if you can do things like El can? What if you can move things too?*

Ridiculous. But what if- *Maybe...?*

He locks his gaze onto one of the eggs he's frying, focusing on its vacant, sunny side up eye. Dives deeper and deeper into it until everything stops around them, trying to focus. It required something like focus. A deep focus. *Come on. Do a thing. Wait, no, don't think. Just focus. Shut up brain. Ok, slowly WAIT WHAT-*

The egg suddenly shoots up from its place in the pan.

"Jesus-! Shit-!" Jonathan yells, getting so startled he accidentally smacks it out of the air with the spatula. It lands somewhere on the floor with a firm splat and he fumbles around to find his balance, but instead finds Will and El standing on the other end of the kitchen, frozen in place and eyes wide.

"Guys, what-?!" he pants, dazed by the sudden rush of adrenaline. Will starts to stammer his apologies, but Hopper comes storming into the kitchen to interrupt him.

"Hey! What's going on in here?"

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In the evening Jonathan attempts to read before bed, but can't seem to focus. He's been staring at the words of that same sentence over

and over for a while now and finally surrenders. He puts the book down with a deep sigh, sitting up on the edge of his bed. Leans his tired head into slow, kneading hands. The pressure to his closed eyes makes shapes grow out of the darkness and he watches them tumble on the inside of his lids for a moment before a ghostly pull makes him straighten up with a hitch in his breath. His room fades back into existence, lit and warm and not dark.

There's a knock on the door and he turns to see El standing in the small gap where he'd left it partly open.

"Hey," he says softly, getting up to greet her at the door.

"Hey," she echoes and nods at him.

He opens the door further and the corner of his mouth tilts up. "What's up?"

"Can I come in?"

Before Jonathan can accept she steps inside and he blinks at her boldness, stumped. She turns around when she reaches his bed and he raises his eyebrows at her in question. She nods and he closes the door.

"I want to apologize," she states after a moment of silence.

"Oh?"

"About the egg."

"Ooh." He wants to laugh, but she looks dead serious, and he clears his throat. "You don't need to apologize, El. I wasn't angry with you, I just got...startled."

She looks conflicted. "Will thought it would be funny. I didn't want to scare you."

"I know you didn't try to scare me," he smiles reassuringly. "It's fine, really."

She sighs and slumps down on the foot of his bed.

“Although...” Jonathan says sitting down next to her, arms resting on his knees, his smile widening. “You wouldn’t think it about Will, but he’s got a bit of a mischievous side.”

“Mischievous..?”

“Oh, uh...playful? Likes to play pranks?”

“Hm.” She considers the word for a moment before nodding decidedly. “Yes.”

“He gets playful. When he’s good.” Jonathan’s eyes drift down to the floor, his smile fading somewhat. “When the nightmares aren’t there and he’s not as anxious.” His hands twist into themselves in his lap. “I don’t want him to grow up hiding that...but I don’t know if I can talk to him properly sometimes. I don’t know if he feels like I understand.” He looks back up at her. “But maybe you can.”

“He does,” El says and a smile finds its way to her lips too. “He talks to me a lot.”

Jonathan nods slowly at that, heart easing from knowing that at least El could be there for his brother. “Yeah? That’s good to hear.”

“But who do you talk to?” She’s looking serious again and her bluntness never fails to throw him off. He fumbles to find the words, running a hand through his hair.

“Uuh, I talk to people. Or I don’t necessarily need- Or- I’m talking to you right now?”

A brow twitches on her face. “Has it come back?”

He looks at her for a second and then sighs as his eyes drift back to the floor. “No...” He shakes his head. “No. I don’t know if there’s anything there honestly. But I feel like I’m going a bit crazy thinking about it.”

“You haven’t been taking any pictures lately.”

That gets to him. She’s absolutely right, he *hasn’t*. He hasn’t even thought about that. Or maybe he has, maybe even a lot, but has only

managed to teeter on the edge of that thought, afraid of what it means.

“Have you gone to the darkroom?” she asks.

He may be darting his eyes back and forth a bit and stuttering a negative. He may not have been super keen on bringing his camera anywhere. He may even have sort of...avoided the darkroom...a bit.

“Will you?”

“Yeah, of course.” She gives him an incredulous look, something he’s sure she’s picked up from Mike. “Eventually. I know there was something about it that triggered the...” His brows tighten. “Thing. It’s why the blindfolds aren’t working.”

El nods and grabs his hand, peering into his eyes. “If it happens...when you’re in there. You know where I am.”

He smiles tenderly. “I do.”

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Jonathan realizes that he can’t stay away from the darkroom forever. He can’t just give up his grades and his passion for photography because of this. He’s already failed his latest assignment and it’s getting out of hand. It’s stupid, really.

He’s got an extra long lunch break one day and he finally decides to visit the darkroom again. As usual nobody visits on lunch hours. After he drops his things on one of the counters he just stands there leaning on it for a while, biting on one of his nails, stalling. Anxiety is rising in his chest, but as his eyes move across the room at all of the equipment, things that had always brought him comfort and escape when there was none, it eventually morphs into frustration. *Ok, fine. Fine!*

Making sure the radio is tuned to static - which is most frequencies anyway - he barges into the prep room and slams the door shut. Lays



his hands flat on the counter, closes his eyes. *Come on. No, focus first. Think about her, the photographs. Like last time.*

He's still got his hands planted firmly on the counter. Nothing is slipping away, nothing takes over. Nothing.

*Just come on. Come on you son of a bitch, show me. Show me!*

His eyes fly open when he realizes he shouted that last part.

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It's a sunny Sunday afternoon in September and Jonathan's hanging out with Will at Castle Byers in the woods behind their house. He's got his camera with him for the first time in weeks, trying to catch the crisp light filtering through the yellowing trees and playing over his brother's shy smiles.

While Jonathan's busy looking up at the crowns through the lens Will suddenly pops up behind him and squeezes his sides - Jonathan's biggest weak spot. He yelps and they look at each other for a few astonished seconds before Will sets off and he chases after. Before long he catches up. Will was getting taller, but was still small enough for Jonathan to lift easily and he wraps his arms around his brother's waist, picking him up in laughing triumph.

Later Will retreats to his castle to do some drawing. Eventually Jonathan joins him to inspect his brother's newest works - it's been a while since he's gotten a closer look at them. He was getting so insanely good, he thinks out loud, and quietly wishes that Will would never, ever stop drawing.

There's lots of knights and mythical beasts, as is the usual theme. Jonathan's glad to find that the likeness to the shadow monsters and demons from that other place has faded somewhat over time, but he also understands that portraying them was a way for his brother to process what he'd been through. Now however, there is once again drawings of his friends as their D&D characters. There's even some

new ones he hasn't seen before like a girl with fiery hair in a cloak wielding daggers and another one with brown curls in purple robes and a staff in her hand, eyes glowing. Must be Max and El he figures, and confirms it when Will stops his drawing briefly to explain their classes.

As Jonathan flips through more drawings he comes across another character he's never seen before. He's got brown, wild hair and wears a combination of robes, leather and mail with deep maroon details, kneeling in front of two wizards with a sword in one hand and an orb of fire floating in the other. His expression is calm, eyes closed sagely. Jonathan elbows Will in the side gently to get his attention.

"Hey, who's this? I've never seen him before."

Will looks over. "Oh. Uuh..." He escapes back to his drawing and mumbles "It's...you."

"What?" Jonathan laughs. "I've got a character too?"

Will can't help but to smile and nods.

"That's so cool! I don't even play!" Jonathan exclaims and nudges closer to his brother. "So what does he do? He looks like a knight, but has magic like a wizard."

"Yeah, he's...something in between. Like a war mage."

"War mage?"

"They're mainly warriors, but in lighter armor, and can use some magic too."

"Ooh." Jonathan turns his attention to the kind of magic at hand and hums curiously. "Isn't it *your* character that usually throws the fireballs, though?"

Will shakes his head. "Not so much anymore. And...you did it too-" He hesitates for a second and then adds "With the Demogorgon."

Jonathan's smile fades and something sinks in the pit of his stomach at the mention of that terrifying monster...that terrifying night. "Oh.

Well...It was just a lighter,” he mumbles. “Not magic.”

Will shrugs, keeping his eyes on his drawing. “Mmh. Either way you did the talking thing like El does, so your character needed to have some magic like hers.”

Jonathan stares at the drawing in his hands for a while. “You still think I can do it?”

“Totally.” Will looks up. “Don’t you?”

“I don’t know. It hasn’t happened again.”

“Have you told Nancy about it?”

“No. It’s just...” Jonathan shakes his head and sighs. “I don’t know what that was. It was weird for sure, but I don’t know if it really means anything. I don’t want to go around saying things like that for nothing, you know? Worrying people for nothing-”

“So if it’s nothing, why don’t you just tell her?” Will retorts without second thought. Jonathan doesn’t quite know what to say to that, a bit taken aback at his brother’s astute comment. He glances over at Will’s current drawing to find the knight together with the curly-haired wizard and the blue cleric, standing on a rock looking out over a vast, barren landscape. Far off in the distance there’s a giant, ominous fortress growing out of an erupting volcano.

“I guess you’re right.”

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A couple of days later he’s back in the darkroom again, this time to develop that Sunday afternoon film. He’s a bit hesitant to close the door to the prep room, but then shakes his head at himself. *It was fine last time. I even tried. It’s nothing.*

That familiar darkness embraces him as the last slivers of crimson light rip away. He slips into his usual rhythm, pulling the spool out of

the canister and the echoing sound of the film being rotated into place on the holder. Will was going to be excited to see these pictures, he's sure of it. Then the scissors snap and everything goes to shit again.

*Oh no*, he thinks without anger or remorse; just a curious observation of the situation. Everything slows to a comfortable, floaty halt before static needles itself into his brain, stabs him with questions and cries for help and every voice in the universe fits in his head like a stampede that crushes him under its massive hooves-

That gasp for air.

He's back. He's back in here, in that *place*. Endless void of endless blackness of endless silence. No up or down, nothing solid or real.

*But*, he realizes, *that means there's somebody in here*. He can find a point of reference like last time. *No need to panic, don't panic, just find the reference point-*

"Jonathan?" a voice echoes from far away. He turns around.

"Will!"

His brother is slowly emerging from the darkness. "You did it! Are you in the...?"

"The darkroom, yeah. I didn't mean to do it, it just-"

Suddenly something rattles and Will's figure blurs. He's still approaching, but he doesn't seem to be moving. Jonathan hurries to him.

"Will? Will!"

Will answers, but there's nothing he can make of it. A slow, pulsating beat of a heart seeps into his consciousness and surrounds him, thrums and overpowers him. He looks around to find its source but there's nothing and when he looks back to Will he finds he's no longer there. He's alone again in the dark.

Heavy breaths the size of tornadoes burst into his ears and through

the deafening noise another voice cries out his name in panic and he runs towards it, wherever that is. It's cold, the crunch of twigs is underneath his feet, the flicker of a light hisses in his face and blinds him. He recoils and staggers, and as he regains his sight he realizes that the crunch isn't coming from twigs, but from white, cracking, festering *bones*.

Then it stabs him in the back. With claws and a million teeth it pulls him down into the nothingness.

When his head hits a wall he knows he's back, falling down into a heap on the floor. Crimson flashes over him as a door flings open and a figure appears in its way, a pair of familiar blue eyes staring back at him.

“Jonathan?!”

*Nancy...*